



Joanna Woś, *Untitled*, 2021, oil on canvas, 1.7 × 1.1 m

## Joanna Woś

‘Extreme seductiveness is at the boundary of horror,’ wrote Georges Bataille in his 1928 erotic novella *Story of the Eye*. A similar understanding can be seen in the work of Joanna Woś, who – bucking the trend for sex positivity in recent figurative painting – depicts scenes of wanton debauchery that seduce and repel in equal measure.

Group sex is a recurring theme in the Polish-born, Austrian-based artist’s oil paintings. In an untitled canvas from 2019, for instance, four bald figures in modest dress – presumably women – hold aloft a fifth person whose own skirt is hitched up to reveal her vulva. Similarly, an untitled 2021 scene depicts another woman – the artist herself – sticking her snakelike tongue into the crevice of a faceless character’s buttocks. In the background, a row of dress-suited legs surrounds the copulating couple, while two ghostly faces hover ominously in the foreground as if manifested by Woś’s own subconscious.

Whether these women are victims or morally corrupt temptresses is purposely hard to tell. ‘Ambiguity is a big part of my practice’, the 30-year-old artist tells me, adding that the uneven power dynamics in the works were initially inspired by patriarchal relationships within her own family. This may be one reason why shame seems to drip like sweat from paintings such as a 2019 double portrait of the artist that shows her both being entered from behind and sitting on a chair – naked and possibly unconscious – with her legs spread. Along the top edge of the canvas, two lamps illuminate the scene with a wan yellow light while also titillatingly suggesting a pair of prying eyes. I’m again reminded of a line from Bataille’s sacrilegious tale: ‘We did not lack modesty – on the contrary – but something urgently drove us to defy modesty together as immodestly as possible.’ – *Chloe Stead*

*This article first appeared in frieze issue 222 with the headline ‘Five Young Painters to Follow’.*